

XIX.—*The Sea-birds and Waders of the Pacific Coast of Guatemala.* By OSBERT SALVIN, M.A., F.L.S., &c.

IN a previous Number of this Journal (Ibis, 1864, p. 372) I gave some account of the Sea-birds of British Honduras; following up the subject, I now propose to do the same for those of the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, combining with them a notice of such Waders as I observed, together with a few notes of what befell me in those out-of-the-way parts.

In the month of September 1862, Mr. Robert Owen and I, then travelling in company, found ourselves at Retaluleu, a town on the lowlands of the Pacific slope of the Cordillera. We had ridden there from Quezaltenango, a large town in the Altos, and the capital of a considerable district, all the corn-growing and sheep-producing highlands. The descent of 7000 feet to the coast-country, as it is commonly called, though still a long way from the sea, is all accomplished in a distance of about forty miles. We made the journey more with a view of exploring for some future expedition than with the hope of doing much at that time of year—the height of the rainy season. While staying at Retaluleu I heard accounts, which gave such glowing prospects of collecting fish from the lagoons of the coast, and of obtaining a number of birds I had heard of, but not seen, that, making all due allowance for exaggeration, I still thought I could not do better than turn my steps thither on the first opportunity, and at a more favourable season.

On the 8th of January 1863, I reached the port of San José de Guatemala to take a passage in the barque ‘Vicuña,’ which was going to Champerico, the “port” of that part of the coast I wished to visit, to take in a cargo of sugar and coffee. I was fortunate in meeting with this means of reaching my destination, as it enabled me to take a barrel of spirit, and other heavy things, that would otherwise have been troublesome had I travelled by land.

I spent several days in San José, and passed the time shooting along the beach and about the lagoons; but as all the birds I met with occurred again at my next station, it will not be worth while to mention them here. On the 15th we left San José,—

the other passengers, besides myself, being an Englishman, Mr. E., who went to inspect the shipping of the cargo, and two Germans, one of whom had purchased produce in the interior; what the other was after, I never could make out. There is no such thing as a harbour anywhere along this part of the coast. Ships, which come to take in and discharge cargo, lie at anchor in an open roadstead, and boats are hauled to and fro through the surf by means of a rope, attached at one end to a buoy, and tightened from the shore. If the sea runs at all high (and this is speaking superlatively, as the heavy roll from the Pacific Ocean is never very slight), considerable risk is run in communicating with vessels, and not unfrequently no boat can pass. All the necessary paraphernalia of boats, buoys, and ropes, had to be taken to Champerico, as only on the occasion of a vessel touching there is the "port" open.

When a vessel is dependent upon land- and sea-breezes, her progress is often slow. It took the 'Vicuña' three days before she dropped anchor off a large thatched rancho on the beach, over which a flag was flying. It was rather a relief to find the place, as nobody on board knew exactly where it was. I had an indifferent map, showing the various fisheries along the shore; and we could make out, by a break in the continuous bank of sand forming the beach, where a large river entered the sea. By thus guessing the way, we at last made out the flag, putting an end to doubt. While it was calm enough to pick them up, I shot a few Sea-Gulls which followed the ship, and succeeded in securing a good specimen of *Larus cucullatus*, Licht., besides some of the much commoner *L. atricilla*, the Laughing Gull. In opening a communication with the shore the rope is first taken in a canoe, the "lancha," or boat, remaining outside the breakers. On this occasion the canoe upset in the surf; but the men, accustomed to such mishaps, succeeded in getting the end of the rope on shore. It does not often happen that a single rancho is distinguished with a name in a map; but Champerico is thus marked, consisting solely of a large store house, or *almacen*. Here I put up, with Mr. E., amongst the sugar- and coffee-bags. On arriving, I found Enrique Arcé (who was then, and is now, collecting birds), and my servant, Crux, who had

travelled by land with my mules, &c. ; so that I had now got everything together to commence work. Champerico was provisioned from the interior, water being brought down from a neighbouring creek in a canoe. Every morning a native paddled or punted the canoe up the sluggish stream till he considered the water fresh enough to drink, when he half-filled the canoe, and floated it down again. If the fellow was lazy he would take his stock too soon, and a flood of well-merited abuse would be heaped upon him for the rest of the day. It can be as easily understood as explained, that no amount of exertion on his part would make the water very palatable under the circumstances.

In a few words I will endeavour to explain the nature of the country immediately adjoining the sea. During the continuance of the wet season all the torrents, for such they are, which descend from the Cordillera flow, charged with volcanic sand and disintegrated scorix. These, on being discharged, the ocean casts back in a continuous line of sandbank. The constant heaping up of this sandbank often has the effect of closing the mouths of the smaller streams during the dry season, when the outflow is not sufficient to reduce the sand-bar. Such small streams then expand *inside* the sand-beach, forming lagoons and marshes along the whole coast. Sometimes the pressure and the rise of water inside breaks an opening to the sea during the ensuing wet season ; at others, the lagoon remains as such for several seasons. In order to obtain fish, an artificial passage is frequently dug by the owner of the lagoon, when the tide will enter at each rise, bringing many species of fish from the ocean. This passage will remain open for a few months, though sometimes closing at once, thus limiting the quantity of fish to the number then enclosed, as the pent-up waters would no longer exist to assist in forming a fresh outlet. Other lagoons are purposely drained for salt. A kind of sluice is made, and the water run off at low tide. The salt is procured by scraping the mud into small heaps, and allowing it to dry, as much as possible, in the sun. It is then put into an old canoe, or trough, and mixed with water, which is drained off, and boiled in earthen pans. A large quantity of salt is procured in this district, both for curing fish, and for sending to the towns in

the interior. There is some risk in procuring salt; a heavy shower washes a considerable portion of the saline particles out of the mud, so that it is no longer fit for the purpose. Still it is said to be a profitable undertaking; and several persons living in Retaluleu are reputed wealthy, from the salt-works they own. The lagoon of Chiapam I visited most frequently, being about half a mile from Champerico. The mayor-domo who had charge of the salt-works and fisheries, was uncle to the owner; and Tio Lencho, as he was usually called, did all that he could to assist me, by lending me a canoe and an Indian, or *mozo*, whenever I required one. Finding it better to be nearer my work, I moved all my things to his rancho.

This lagoon, when I visited it, was a tidal one. The bar had been cut through during the previous October, and had not again closed, though I heard afterwards that the outlet had silted up. At low water every sandbank would be covered with Gulls, Terns, and Waders. Of the former I obtained specimens, and saw quantities of *Larus atricilla*, and also a few immature birds of the White-headed Gull (*Larus heermanni*, Bp.) in the brown Skua-like plumage it at first assumes. Hooded Gulls (*Larus cucullatus*, Br.) did not frequent the lagoons. Of Terns there were numbers—the flock consisting principally of Cabot's Tern (*Thalasseus acuflavidus*, Cabot), the American representative of our English Sandwich-Tern, and the Royal Tern (*T. regia*, Gambel). I also saw occasionally Gull-billed Terns (*Gelochelidon anglica*, Mont.), identical with the scarce British, but commoner European, species which occasionally visits our shores (Ibis, 1864, p. 389). This last species does not congregate in any numbers, two or three at most being all that flew in company. The Long-billed (*Numenius longirostris*, Wils.) and Hudsonian Curlews (*N. hudsonicus*, Lath.) were both there—the former being scarce, but the latter in quantities. Godwits (*Limosa fedoa*, Ord) were also very abundant, and Willets (*Symphemia semipalmata*, Hartl.). All these used generally to be observed in one flock, with a pair of Oyster-catchers (*Hæmatopus palliatus*, Temm.) feeding in their vicinity. Grey Plovers (*Squatarola helvetica*, Cuv.) were occasionally seen, their unmistakeable black axillary feathers enabling one to distinguish the species at a distance.



Another flock would consist of Ring-Plovers, of which I found three species—Wilson's Plover (*Ægialites wilsonianus*, Cassin), the Semipalmated Plover (*Æ. semipalmatus*, Cab.), and the Western Plover (*Æ. nivosus*, Cassin). The first two were by far the commonest; of the last I obtained but one specimen. It appears to be a very rare bird, but few specimens existing in collections. Wilson's Plover remains to breed on the cays of the east coast, as I have mentioned in my previous paper (Ibis, *loc. cit.*). The only other Ring-Plover (*Æ. vociferus*, Cass.) which I have observed in Guatemala seems to prefer freshwater marshes in the interior to these salt tide-washed sandbanks. This last-mentioned species is common in the highland swamps, but is also found in similar localities in the hot districts of little elevation. Another common Wader frequenting the sandbanks was the Brown Snipe (*Macrorhamphus griseus*, Leach). I used always to see it feeding in the open where there was no cover whatever, its habits strongly contrasting in this respect with the common Snipe, to which it is closely allied. This bird and the European Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*, L.) seem to represent two extremes as regards choice of feeding-ground, the true Snipes occupying an intermediate place in their preference of grass and seeds. Another bird, though not very numerous, was the Turnstone (*Streptilas interpres*, Illig.)—the wide-spread species, and not the Western American form called the Black Turnstone (*S. melanocephala*, Vig.). Semipalmated Sandpipers (*Ereunetes petrificatus*, Ill.), too, were very common. The variation in the length of the bill in this bird is very remarkable. Out of the same flock I have shot specimens whose bills varied in length at least a quarter of an inch.

My fishing excursions used frequently to take me up the creeks, or *esteros*, as they are commonly called. Their banks are lined with thick mangroves, amongst the tangled roots of which I usually saw Tiger-Bitterns (*Tigrisoma tigrinum*, Sw.) skulking, and also the small Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*, Bp.). Yellow-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax violaceus*, Bp.), too, were not uncommon; and beautiful Snowy Egrets (*Garzetta candidissima*, Bp.) would always attract the eye as they rested on the mangrove boughs. A small flock of Roseate Spoonbills (*Platalea ajaja*, L.) not unfrequently flew across the creek, seldom within shot, but

often near enough to show their brilliant colour. Cormorants (*Carbo mexicanus*, Brandt) rested on the trees or swam in the muddy water; and, perched on a topmost bough, a White Ibis (*Ibis alba*, Vieill.) would sit eyeing the movements of the canoe. It is often laughable to watch the hesitating movements of many of these birds. As the canoe approaches, they seem to have great difficulty in making up their minds whether to fly or not; you see them crouch down ready for a start, and then raise themselves up again, as if they thought its inmates were not quite so dangerous as they looked. If the head of the canoe be directed straight towards them, they soon make off; but if you approach by a deviating course, they seem to conclude they are not the object of your search. Nearly all the birds of these districts show little fear, and do not seem yet to have acquired the knowledge that man had always better be kept at a very respectful distance, his presence never betokening good to their race.

In the marshes drained for salt I observed many more birds. There is usually a shallow pool in the middle, round and in which they congregate. Let us approach cautiously through the fringe of mangroves, and see what birds are there. A few small fish have attracted some Pelicans and Terns. The former are perhaps fishing, taking short flights in the air and dashing down upon their prey, or resting, preening their feathers—an occupation a Pelican never seems to tire of: if it stops for a moment, it is sure to begin again with unabated industry. That Heron does not look quite like the common Snowy Heron, nor yet is it the larger kind (*Herodias egretta*, G. R. Gray), a few of which are a short way off: sure enough it is Peale's Egret (*Demiegretta pealii*, Baird). Its train looks different in the distance, and its size is intermediate. There is, too, another species with grey body, and soft rufous neck and train—this is also an acquisition—the Louisiana Heron (*Demiegretta ludoviciana*, Baird), a beautiful and very graceful bird. I watch some Black-necked Stilts (*Himantopus nigricollis*, Vieill.) as they wade about, pecking at the surface of the water. There are great numbers in small flocks. But what are the birds composing the flock at the other end of the pool? My glass discovers them to be Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*, Gm.). None have the rust-coloured head and neck of northern speci-

mens: all have these parts white, and are in the plumage which caused them to be separated by Vigors under the name of *Recurvirostra occidentalis*. Professor Baird considers this to be the immature stage of the northern bird, in which conjecture he is perhaps right; but if identical, may not this be the winter plumage of the red-necked bird? All the birds I saw, and I must have met with several scores, were similarly coloured; and out of so many, a considerable proportion, at least one-third, must have been adult birds, supposing a pair to rear four young. Avocets often swim, and are most industrious feeders, their bills being constantly at work; and how admirably adapted is this curved and sharp-pointed organ for picking the most minute object from the surface of the water! Other large birds frequenting these ponds are the Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*, L.), a species never allowing one to approach it, Roseate Spoonbills, and Wood-Ibises (*Tantalus loculator*, L.).

It was some time before I could make out what Tio Lencho meant by the "Paloma rayadora"—a very curious bird, he said. From the name I suspected it to be the Black Skimmer (*Rhynchops nigra*, L.); but I could never meet with it, till at last I came upon a large flock in a closed lagoon called Acapam, two leagues from Chiapam, where I was staying. They were, exactly as Audubon describes them, sitting on a spit of sand. It was just daylight when I first saw them; they were then resting, and always settled again after being disturbed. I only stayed at this lagoon during the day, and had no opportunity of watching the nocturnal habits they are said to have.

In this lagoon I saw a good many Ducks, principally American Widgeon (*Mareca americana*, Steph.) and Teal (*Querquedula discors*, Steph.). There was also a small flock of Long-legged Ducks (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*, Eyton), and I could plainly hear their clear whistling note as they flew. It is the "Pato chiflador" of the natives. I also found a pair of Ospreys (*Pandion carolinensis*, Bp.); indeed every lagoon has its pair, and the bird is very abundant on both coasts. During my ride back along the beach from this lagoon I saw a Burrowing Owl (*Athene hypogæa*, Bp.) peeping out of a rabbit-hole. It retired as soon as it saw me, and I failed to dig it out. It is a very common species on

the coast, the sandy beach being no doubt favourable to its peculiar habits.

Whilst I was staying with Tio Lencho, some of his nieces and relations came from Retaluleu to enjoy a "temporada" at the sea-side. The alcalde, one Manuel Quiñones, accompanied them. Though very stout, he was active, and, besides being a tolerable shot, used a fish-spear with some dexterity. He often went out fishing and shooting with me. One evening, when the tide was out, we went along the beach to get some Crustaceans, called there *Chiquirin* and *Rey chiquirin*, which frequent the sand, and are found just within reach of the water as it flows and ebbs over them. They bury themselves in the sand, the feelers only remaining exposed. I was not at all up to catching them; but Quiñones was very skilful; and a most absurd sight it was to see him as he ran along in the water in the lightest possible costume, every now and then rushing forward and digging rapidly with his hands. If successful, he would toss the *Chiquirin* high on the beach, where it was duly secured. Spanish is an accommodating language, so that this process was called "chiquiriniando"! Vast numbers of these Sand-hoppers are caught, spitted on a stick, a dozen in a string, and toasted over a fire. They are sent thus prepared to Quezaltenango and the Altos, where they are esteemed a great delicacy by the Indians.

The same evening we shot two Iguanas as they came out of the sea, having been down to wet themselves; one gave us a long chase, as it escaped into the surf.

I had still another series of lagoons to visit; but to get there, it was advisable to go round by Retaluleu; so packing all my fish and sending them to San José by the 'Vicuña,' I rode all one night by moonlight, and reached Retaluleu the next morning. It was a tedious journey; but night is preferable to the scorching heat of the day, the forest not being dense enough in many places to afford much shade; the dust, too, which is very bad during this season, does not cause so much annoyance by night. There is a great contrast between the ornithic productions of the two sides of Guatemala, the Pacific coast being remarkable chiefly for the absence of many of the most familiar birds of the low forests of Vera Paz. One listens in vain for the melancholy



wail of the Colola (*Tinamus robustus*, ScL., and *T. boucardi*, ScL.); nor is the well-known cry "Tres-pesos-son," from the Pigeon (*Columba nigrirostris*, ScL.), ever heard. Nor yet does the large Cacique (*Ostinops montezuma*, ScL.) ever disturb the silence of the forest. The eye, too, searches in vain for familiar forms of Tanagers (*Rhamphocelus* and *Calliste*); nor is a single Chatterer (*Cotinga amabilis*, Gould) anywhere to be seen. Much of the forest consists of bamboo, with here and there a huge lieba. There is, however, a belt of normal tropical forest, four leagues wide, commencing about twelve miles from the sea, between which and the sea the soil seems comparatively unproductive. Everything bears the stamp of land reclaimed from the sea at a comparatively recent date. The long line of volcanoes suggest a recent slow upheaval; and the constant discharge of sand by every river would tend to advance the coast-line by slow degrees.

Such speculations occupied my thoughts as I rode to Huamuchal, my last fishing-destination. This name is applied to a district lying on the Mexican frontier, the boundary being the river Tilapa, the right bank of which is in the province of Soco-nusco, and therefore Mexican territory, though Guatemala, according to some maps, lays claim to the ownership. The country is almost perfectly flat, and during the rainy season the greater portion of it is flooded. The first rise of the river causes this, and a stretch of country, extending inland some twelve or fifteen miles, is covered with water. As the dry season sets in, the water gradually subsides, leaving a number of shallow lagoons in the depressions of the land, none of which are more than about four feet deep. It sometimes happens, in seasons of great drought, that even these dry up, with the exception of one large lagoon—that of Tamachian. From this, Huamuchal would be re-stocked with fish. The species of fish are not numerous; they consist of an *Atractosteus*, two species of *Pimelodus*, two of *Heros*, two or three Salmonoids, and some three or four more kinds. The first is the most remarkable, its occurrence here showing a wider range of a northern genus. It is also found in some lagoons on the frontier of San Salvador. During the period just preceding Lent it is much

sought for. The process of preparing it differs from that applied to other species, which are split and then salted. The "Peje Armado," as it is called, has the scales united into a strong kind of armour. A sharp stake is cut and thrust into the mouth of the fish, and passed quite through its whole length. It is then roasted over a fire till the scaly coating splits and can be easily removed. This done, the roasting is proceeded with, but over a slower fire. The stake, which is often an inch and a half in diameter, is not withdrawn; but with the ends chopped off, the prepared "Armado" is sent into the interior. Very few reach Guatemala, as the Indians of the Altos consume all before they get so far. It is a favourite cargo for an Indian pedlar for his return journey, when he has come from the Altos with the productions of the cold climate—flour and cloth; for, in spite of the heat, every Indian possesses his *chamarra*, or rug. A few cattle are fed at Huamuchal, which on the approach of the floods are driven further inland. The water of the lagoons is slightly brackish and very muddy, being constantly stirred by alligators, turtle, fish and innumerable birds.

There was a mayor-domo of the *hacienda*, and a mayor-domo of the "*pesqueria*," or fisheries—the one to look after the cattle, and the other to superintend the fishing. Both these dignitaries were "sambos"; that is, half-bred, Indian and Negro. I put up in a rancho attached to the former department, both because there was grass at hand for the mules, and it was near the river where the water is fresh. The fisheries were about two miles off. The practice was, when one lagoon failed to yield sufficient fish, to haul the canoe overland to another; and the rancho in which the Indians lived was in a central point near a cluster of lagoons. The Indian workmen, mayor-domos and all, are bound almost as closely to their master as if they were slaves. They commence service by borrowing money, which the master takes care is not repaid, as the existence of the debt gives him great power over his workpeople, almost enabling him to compell them to work to pay the sum they owe. This goes on all their lives. By an arrangement between masters, a servant and his debt change hands. This is rather like slavery; but I never saw

any of the cruel features of that "institution" practised, nor do I think such would be permitted.

With the exception of the Gulls and Terns, of which I saw none, most of the birds of Chiapam occur at Huamuchal. In my walk to the lagoons I usually saw great numbers of Wood-Ibises, literally hundreds of Ducks (mostly Shoveller, Widgeon, and Teal), Stilts, Avocets, Herons, and Spoonbills; nor were Sandpipers less numerous. There were, however, several birds which call for special attention, as either I had not observed them anywhere else, or they had rarely come under my notice. I had heard of a great bird called, in Retaluleu, "*Garzon pulido*," but could never make out what it was; I suggested the Wood-Ibis, but they would not hear of it. The bird, they said, was three or four times as large. Fancy my astonishment at seeing the American Jabiru (*Mycteria americana*, L.) stalking about the banks of one of the lagoons. It cost me no small trouble to obtain specimens, as it proved to be a most wary bird. At last, one afternoon, I happened to be in a canoe, and seeing one on the bank, steered for it. Fortunately, it was so busily engaged with an eel, that when it took wing I was near enough to bring the huge bird down with a double shot. It was wounded, and showed fight as the canoe shot by; Enrique, who was in the bows, defended himself with a game-bag; I, as we passed it, fenced its formidable bill with my gun; while the Indian jumped overboard and made off. It was a splendid bird, measuring 6 feet 6 inches from the tip of the bill to the end of the toes. As in many more of its allies, the white feathers have a beautiful satin-like gloss. The bare neck and head, in life, are deep black, succeeded by red on the lower third of the neck. Its step is slow and stately. The home of this *Mycteria* is the Amazons; and I was surprised to find it so far from what I thought was its native land. Enrique afterwards shot another, a female, with a few white feathers about the head.

These lagoons were frequented by a large flock of White Pelicans (*Pelicanus erythrorhynchus*, Gm.), a bird I had long sought. The first time I found the flock, they were feeding in a lagoon; and I tried to secure some specimens by hiding on the bank, while Enrique waded and drove them. They all rose out of

shot, and, wheeling round, left the lagoon. They settled on another, but again took wing long before I was within reach. It is a bird that soars a great deal more than the common species (*P. fuscus*, L.), which never, to my knowledge, does more than skim the surface of the waves, in flocks of six or eight, or, in larger numbers, fly from its feeding- to its roosting-place. I frequently saw these birds soaring in the air like Vultures, and mounting by gyrations till almost lost to sight. After a time they would gradually descend, and then fly off to a lagoon to feed. There must have been nearly a thousand individuals in this huge flock; and the noise they made, by dashing into the water when feeding, could be heard at a great distance. I observed they never flew far when in pursuit of fish—twenty or thirty yards, at most, from where they rose, to their plunge on their prey. The water would be quite lashed into a foam where many plunged in together. After several disappointments, I at last was fortunate. The flock was feeding in a lagoon where there were two canoes, in one of which some men were fishing with a drag-net. Seeing that the birds took very little notice of the fishermen, Enrique and I joined them in the other canoe, and, after waiting about for some time, managed, by degrees, to get within shot, when our four barrels brought down four birds. These we had to carry to the rancho in a scorching sun at mid-day. They weighed almost a hundredweight. There were a considerable number of Stone-Curlews (*Ædicnemus bistratus*, Wagl.) frequenting the grassy *savanas* between the lagoons. I used to see them almost every day, and on one occasion found a nest with one egg. They cry at night, just as our English Norfolk Plovers do, the notes being very similar. Musk-Ducks (*Cairina moschata*, Flem.) being a desideratum to my collection, I devoted one afternoon to the pursuit of them. They are seldom seen in the open water, but prefer the creeks shaded by mangroves, where they abound, resting either on the trees, or swimming in the water. I was unlucky—seeing many, but none within shot. They are wary birds, never allowing one to approach them. Enrique afterwards secured specimens.

It can easily be imagined that the neighbourhood of so many stagnant pools is by no means healthy. One runs the risk,



